

Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926): The Series Paintings

In the 1880s, many of the painters who had helped to forge impressionism became dissatisfied with it. Pissarro experimented with neoimpressionism. Renoir went to Italy, where he was inspired by the works of Raphael to adopt a more classical style. And Monet began to explore the same subject repeatedly in what are known today as his “series” paintings: grainstacks, poplar trees, Rouen cathedral, and other subjects, some near his home, others in England, Norway, and Italy. Finally, in the last decades of his life, Monet settled in to devote his entire attention to the lily pond he constructed in his garden at Giverny.

The series pictures diverged from impressionism in important ways. Though Monet began them in front of his subject—often working on several canvases simultaneously—he spent many long hours reworking them in his studio, sometimes over a period of years. “The further I go,” he wrote, “the better I see that it takes a great deal of work to succeed in rendering what I want to render: ‘instantaneity,’ above all the *enveloppe*, the same light spread over everything, and I’m more than ever disgusted at things that come easily, at the first attempt.”

The *enveloppe* that attracted Monet was the air itself, the unifying atmosphere that lay between him and his subject. As a younger man he had sought to capture the visual effects of light and weather by painting quickly and directly out of doors, but now he pursued the most ephemeral effects slowly and with deliberation. The relationship between subject and painting evolved. He explored color and light as more purely artistic concerns and increasingly sought internal, pictorial unity—not only in each painting but in each series as a whole. Harmonizing colors and textures allowed him to elaborate his original response to a scene and to explore the effects of mood produced by differing light and color.



Banks of the Seine, Vétheuil, 1880

During the early years of impressionism, one of Monet’s primary intentions was to capture fleeting effects of light and atmosphere. Working quickly, out of doors, he sought to transcribe with directness and spontaneity his sensory experience of the landscape before him. But by about 1880, when this picture was painted, Monet was already beginning to show more interest in the painted surface itself. This interest would lead him to explore the same subject repeatedly in his series paintings, seeking to unify individual canvases and harmonize each series as a whole.

Here, brushstrokes vary in response to the different textures they portray—contrast, for example, the quick horizontal skips in the river’s gently rippled surface with the rounder, swirling forms of the sky. But it is the foreground, where thick grasses and flowers are painted with crowded, exuberant strokes, that draws our attention. These heavy layers of paint were probably not completed on the spot, but instead carefully reworked in the studio. The strokes assume an importance in their own right, becoming decorative as well as descriptive. Monet, however, never strays far from the natural forms that were his inspiration.

Oil on canvas, .734 x 1.005 m (28 7/8 x 39 5/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.177



Rouen Cathedral, West Facade, Sunlight, 1894

In late January or early February 1892, Monet rented rooms across from Rouen cathedral. He remained until spring, painting its looming facade many times, most often as we see it here, close up and cropped to the sides. The next winter he returned to paint the cathedral again, making in all more than thirty views of it. But it was not so much the deeply carved Gothic facade that was Monet’s subject as it was the atmosphere—the *enveloppe*—that surrounded the building. “To me the motif itself is an insignificant factor,” Monet said. “What I want to reproduce is what exists between the motif and me.”

He worked on a number of canvases simultaneously, moving from one to the next as the light and weather changed. From the late 1860s Monet had attempted to transcribe his sensory impression of the landscape, but his intentions now were different. He continued to claim that his works were spontaneous records of his visual experience, but increasingly he elaborated them in the studio, emphasizing the subjectivity of his vision.

He brought the cathedral paintings back to his home in Giverny (about half-way between Paris and Rouen) and

Oil on canvas, 1.001 x .658 m (39 5/8 x 25 15/16 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.179



Rouen Cathedral, West Facade, 1894

worked on them laboriously in the studio. Heavily painted surfaces show him struggling at times to finish these paintings, to harmonize them as a group. Monet conceived of them together and did not consider that any one of them was complete until all were finished. He finally exhibited twenty of them in Paris in 1895. This collectiveness suggests that Monet’s aims were no longer to simply record his sensory experience, but to explore light and color more deliberately as purely artistic concerns and as expressions of mood. He was seeking, he wrote a friend while working on the cathedral series, “more serious qualities.”

Oil on canvas, 1.001 x .659 m (39 5/8 x 25 15/16 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.49



The Seine at Giverny, 1897

From the early 1860s until 1889, not a single year passed that Monet did not paint the Seine. Its flower-strewn banks and watery reflections appear in nearly a quarter of all his paintings in the National Gallery. In 1896, though, he began a more systematic study of the river near his home at Giverny. Lured by the lifting haze and quickly changing light of early morning, he rose before sunrise—at 3:30 a.m.—to be at his easel by dawn. He worked from a flat-bottomed boat drawn up near the bank. But, as with his other series paintings, Monet only began the pictures outdoors, elaborating them over a period of months in his studio, taking special pains to adjust their light. These paintings, more precisely than his other series pictures, show the progression of time and the subtle changes in light as hours, even minutes, pass.

This painting is related to the early morning series, but those are more crisply defined. The paint here, although it is often thickly applied on the canvas, gives the impression of transparency, like thin veils of mist. It is this *enveloppe* that unifies the picture with a vaporous luminosity. Rather than focus on the trees, the line of the water, or sky, Monet subsumes these individual shapes, enveloping forms and reflections alike in the soft light. The surface becomes a decorative pattern of curving arabesques.

Oil on canvas, .813 x .660 m (32 x 26 in.)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1972.74.1

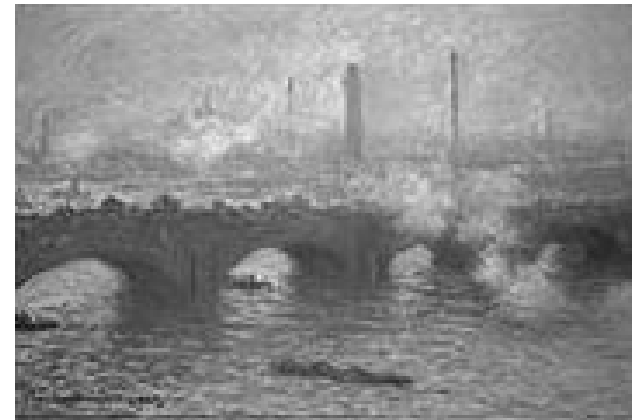


The Houses of Parliament, 1897

Monet and his family lived in England briefly, seeking refuge there during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), and in the late 1890s the artist returned several times to visit his older son. Between 1899 and 1901, Monet made three trips to London, specifically to paint. He went in winter, when the city was clouded with fog and the smoke of coal fires. “Without fog,” Monet said, “London would not be a beautiful city. It is the fog that gives it its magnificent breadth.” From his rooms on the sixth floor of the Savoy Hotel, Monet’s view up and down the Thames provided him subject matter for several series pictures. He could look east to the Waterloo Bridge (see next entry) and west to Charing Cross Bridge. To the right he could also see the Houses of Parliament, but Monet painted them from Saint Thomas’ Hospital across the river, where he had a more direct view. In all he did more than one hundred Thames paintings, by far the largest number of any of his series. Most, like this one, render the city’s famous landmarks as darkened silhouettes cloaked in the misty sky. He worked at prescribed times of day to capture this backlit effect, often complaining about the rapidity with which conditions changed.

In 1904, Monet exhibited thirty-seven London pictures, including this one and *Waterloo Bridge, Gray Day*.

Oil on canvas, 1.511 x 1.802 m (59 1/2 x 71 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.112



Waterloo Bridge, Gray Day, 1903

With their smokestacks, barge traffic, and busy bridges, Monet’s London paintings were emphatically urban—the only urban subjects he painted after the 1870s. After returning to France following the Franco-Prussian War, he moved from Paris, preferring to live nearer the countryside. His interest in London and its light-filtering fog may have been spurred by admiration for English artist J.M.W. Turner, whose influential paintings of the Thames can be seen in our galleries devoted to nineteenth-century British art. Turner’s luminous views presented a challenge many landscape painters were eager to confront. By the 1890s, paintings of the London fog were far from new. A series of *Nocturnes* by America expatriate James McNeill Whistler, a friend of Monet, had further increased their popularity.

Like Whistler, most artists used a subdued palette and a limited range of colors to reproduce the grayness of the city. Monet’s London paintings are quite different. Even to these subjects dulled by fog and coal dust, he brought an eye that saw color in every form. Drifting mists are painted with delicate shades of lilac and pink, and the sky is tinged with pale olive. The shaded arches of the bridge are darkened with blues, not black, and its traffic is highlighted with brilliant flecks of scarlet.

Oil on canvas, .651 x 1.000 m (25 3/8 x 39 3/8 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.183



The Japanese Footbridge, 1899

Monet began to paint the lily pond in his garden at Giverny while he was completing his series of Rouen cathedral. In the last decades of his life, his prized water garden and the footbridge he built over it became his most important—and eventually only—subject. He began construction of the water garden as soon as he moved to Giverny, petitioning local authorities to divert water from the nearby river. Monet remade the landscape with the same artifice he applied to his paintings—and then he used it, in turn, as his creative focus.

The watery surface, like the atmospheric *enveloppe* Monet sought around the cathedrals and other series subjects, unified his canvases. The sky has already disappeared from this painting; the lush foliage rises all the way to the horizon and space is flattened by the decorative arch of the bridge. Our attention is forced onto the painting itself and held there, not drawn into the scene depicted. In later lily-pond paintings, even more of the setting will evaporate, and the water’s surface alone will occupy the entire canvas. Floating lily pads and mirrored reflections assume equal stature, blurring distinctions between solid objects and transitory effects of light. Monet had always been interested in reflections, seeing their fragmented forms as the natural equivalence for his own broken brushwork.

Oil on canvas, .813 x 1.016 m (32 x 40 in.)
Gift of Victoria Nebeker Coberly, in memory of her son John W. Mudd, and Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg 1992.9.1